



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Hepatitis C

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is an infectious liver disease caused by the Hepatitis C virus (HCV), which can be either acute or chronic. An acute infection means the illness is short-term and occurs in the first 6 months after being exposed to the virus. A chronic infection means the illness is long-term and occurs when the virus remains in a person's body. Chronic infections may progress over years, even decades, and can lead to liver scarring (cirrhosis), liver cancer, and liver failure.

Hepatitis C is the most common blood-borne disease in the United States and the leading cause for a liver transplant. An estimated 4.1 million people in America have the disease. Each year, about 17,000 Americans become infected with HCV. In Indiana, acute hepatitis C is a reportable disease, and needs to be reported within five (5) business days of diagnosis.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

Symptoms may include:

- Jaundice (yellowing of skin or eyes)
- Dark urine
- Stomach pain
- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss
- Nausea and vomiting
- Fever
- Tiredness
- Headache

Symptoms usually appear from 2 weeks to 6 months after being exposed. About 80% of people show no symptoms. It is important to keep in mind that even without symptoms, people can still infect others. About 85 percent of people who become infected with Hepatitis C will become chronic carriers.

How is Hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread mainly by direct contact with infected human blood. It is not spread by touching or sharing eating and drinking utensils. You may have been exposed to Hepatitis C if:

- You have ever shared equipment to inject street drugs or other drugs. These items include syringes, cookers and cotton, which may have been contaminated with blood.
- You received blood, blood products, or solid organ transplants before 1992.
- You ever received long-term kidney dialysis.
- You were ever a health care worker who had frequent contact with blood or had a needle stick injury.
- Your mother had Hepatitis C at the time she gave birth to you.
- You ever shared personal items, like a razor or toothbrush, with a person who had Hepatitis C.
- You ever had unprotected sex with a person who had Hepatitis C.
- You ever received a tattoo from a person that may have used dirty needles or had poor sanitary practices.

Who is at risk for Hepatitis C?

- Injection drug users
- Healthcare workers
- People who have multiple sex partners
- Homeless people (risk of drug use, poor hygiene, poor nutrition, and unsafe living conditions)
- Military veterans who served in the Vietnam War era and those who have participated in high risk behaviors such as drug use and unsafe tattooing

How do I know if I have Hepatitis C?

Blood tests can detect whether you have Hepatitis C. Also, your health care provider may suggest that you be tested for Hepatitis C based on your symptoms (if any) and any risk factors you may have.

How can Hepatitis C be treated?

The most common treatment for Hepatitis C is a combination therapy of ribavirin and interferon. In recent years, there has been great progress in the number and types of treatment options available. Your health care provider will decide which treatment options are best for you. Between 15 – 25% of people who get Hepatitis will clear the virus from their bodies without treatment and not develop chronic infection. It is not fully understood why this happens for some people.

There is currently no vaccine for Hepatitis C. However, if you have Hepatitis C, you should be vaccinated against Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B to prevent those infections.

There are many ways you can be exposed to the Hepatitis C virus. Some ways to avoid transmission are:

- Don't share needles or syringes
- Don't share a toothbrush or razors
- Practice safe sex and use a condom
- Use licensed tattoo and piercing studios

All information presented here is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to:

<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/index.htm>

<http://www.hcvadvocate.org/>

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